

No Place Like Home

by The Unpredictable Muse

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Summary: Spartan Keiko-108 was unofficially and most disgracefully 'retired' from the Spartan program - but she didn't care. She was on the edge of going insane, and she had to make her way in a civilian life without committing suicide * Author's note * Spartan Keiko is my original Spartan that I used in multiple Rps* COMPLETE - Sequel may or may not occur*

1. Welcome to Earth

Keiko-108 was no longer a Spartan. She was no longer affiliated, nor wished to be, with ONI. ONI had wiped its hand clean of her. It had destroyed her records, told her to get lost, and never come back. Considering that she spent at least two decades in cryo, before that fought at least six years of constant war, and before that suffered through training no person should, she wasn't going anywhere near ONI. In fact it would have to take a planet core disruption for her to even accept the UNSC's help.

From this point on out, she was a free woman. Free.

She was a horrible Spartan, there was no doubt about that. It served ONI right to have a taste of their evil deeds coming back on them with adverse consequences. She, Keiko, never wanted to be a Spartan, was kidnapped from her mother at the tender age of five, and for as long as she was a Spartan gave them a reason to regret it.

That was in the past though. The future was in front of her and she wanted to wipe the stain of her past from her memories completely.

The sounds of the airport reminded her of the mission she went on when she was sixteen. Back then people thought she was eighteen due to the scientists manipulation of her father's genetics. She moved forward through the crowd of people at a leisurely pace, her eyes scanning the crowd for any ONI personnel assigned to keep watch over her.

" Jeez, lady watch it!" A harried young man jerked her from her subconscious scanning. She looked back at the ridiculously dressed youth that looked nearly as old as she was physically. She may appear to be only twenty-one but she was actually at least twice that age due to cryo.

" Learn how to dress," She said coldly before moving past him.

He gaped after her before muttering an expletive under his breath.

She moved fairly quickly through the international airport and when she stepped outside, she saw her elderly father waiting for her next to a taxi. She decidedly walked out the farthest exit from them and started down the main road. Vehicles moved past her at high speeds.

Dressed only in grey cargo pants, a grey, form fitting t-shirt, and boots, she was literally wearing the only thing she owned or had to her name beside a story she didn't want to share with anyone. Keiko had chopped off her long black hair so that it hung around her face haphazardly. She did it as much out of practicality as she did an effort to distance herself from the woman she once was. Various scars of battle could be seen, but she had no inclination to explain those either.

The hour turned into two before she finally veered off to the right while the main stretch kept going straight. A few hours walk down the side road lead to a country road. A pick up stopped next to her, the window down. She looked through the window at an older man wearing a straw hat and dirty farm clothes. " Ya' need a lift, Young lady?" He asked in a distinct country accent.

" Nope." She kept walking.

He pressed the truck forward at a crawl to match her pace. " Got a general direction?"

" As far away from the International Airport and my father," She answered bluntly, her irritation rising. She didn't need charity.

" Have a place to stay?" She sighed. " I can't in good conscious leave you out here alone,"

Keiko started to say she could handle herself before she realized he wasn't going away. Furthermore what did it matter? She had no money, and even if ONI offered it, she had no intention of taking their blood money. " Why? You have a spare bed or floor?" She asked wearily. What if he was ONI?

He grabbed the front brim of his straw hat and tipped it to her. " If you need it,"

Keiko moved to open the door of the vehicle when she stopped. She half expected a bullet to come out of nowhere, impact her skull, and leave her dead on the road side. Counting the seconds, she reached twenty before relaxing. Climbing up into the truck, she sat up straight and propped up her elbow on the window frame. Her eyes scanned the surrounding forest.

" Expecting your father to track you down or sumthin'?" The man pressed before chuckling.

Her hand shot toward him before she pulled it back in a sharp jerk. A grimace appeared. "You wouldn't understand," She muttered.

He pressed his foot to the pedal, the truck surged forward, and they put more ground between the main road and them. Keiko only relaxed after five miles into the road. Rolling fields and forests surrounded her. It was quiet. " You have a name?"

" Mynn," She said after a minute passed. Her mother was dead, so she doubted her mother would mind.

A calloused hand touched her tense arm. She turned to regard him in extreme hostility. He didn't remove his hand. " Mynn, I'm just a good ol' farmer who means no harm. Besides you needed a place to stayâ€!" He steered left to avoid a deep ditch.

" I need my sanity," She snapped, plucking his hand away and letting it drop. " Don't touch me,"

She wouldn't blame him if he dropped her off then and there.

Instead he kept driving, started to whistle a merry tune. Within another ten minutes a large farmhouse surrounded by a large garden to the west, fields to the North, and a barn to the east. " Welcome to the homestead, Mynn. The grub is good and the company pleasant," He flashed a warm smile in her direction.

Despite the weariness coursing through her veins, she allowed a small smile. So far he gave her no reason to hurt him. She hoped it stayed that way. She wanted to like the first person that offered her help in her new life as a civilian. He pulled the truck into a worn out spot.

As he stepped down out of the shut off truck, the door to the farmhouse opened and a gray haired woman and two dogs bound towards him. Keiko stepped down from the truck, regarding the woman with the same distrust she felt towards the old man. Still he was providing a place to stay for the night.

She moved forward across the stretch of ground, the husband and wife embracing and trading light kisses on the cheek. The long haired black dog stopped in front of her, it's tongue hanging out.

" Shade!" The woman called out.

The dog turned and ran toward the old woman.

" Come on in, I got dinner on the stove," She told Keiko, ushering the girl into the house.

Keiko paused in the doorway, glancing around the general area looking for any overt signs that someone was watching or anything hidden. When she saw nothing, she stepped into the warm inside. She knew that she had to be careful, but for how long? With a labored sigh, she closed the door behind her.

2. The Family

Lying in a spare bed and staring up at the gray ceiling, she couldn't sleep. She waited for someone to come and take her back. Pretending to sleep, she waited and waited and waited. At the crack of dawn, she was up and already starting for the road when Thomas the farmer called after her. " If you're looking for work, I got some field work I could use help with."

Keiko stopped. " Look, thank you for the food and for the bed, but I can take care of myself," She turned back to the road again.

" Farmland is usually full of places to hide, and hard work usually distracts people from the stray thoughts they don't want to think about," He said before climbing atop his tractor. " You know where to come back to if you want to take up the offer,"

She got halfway to the main road before cursing herself and starting back the other way. Damn Thomas and Helena. Damn that hot meal and comfortable bed. Damn that feeling of like she could call the place home. Damn the two dogs for treating her like a normal person. Damn it, damn it, damn it.

Thomas just smiled when he saw her storming up the road toward the farmhouse.

He didn't say anything to her when he came back that evening. She was helping Helena move furniture around and clean the place so that it would be white glove clean. " I asked for help in the field, not the house," He greeted her with a big smile.

She looked up from the floor, broom poised above a dirt pile. " Yes, well your wife needed my help more. I even helped her gather the wood from out back for the furnace," Keiko didn't smile, but she wasn't being hostile either.

Helena nodded, a smile she couldn't resist. She placed her hand on Keiko's arm. " Mynn is going to be staying with us until she figures out what she wants to do,"

Keiko didn't know how to take Helena's good spirit or Thomas's unquestioning support on the matter. She was glad that there was no fight about it.

" Tomorrow morning, we'll start on the hay. Winter is rolling in soon, and I'll need all the free hands I can get," Keiko nodded immediately, out of habit. She frowned and started sweeping.

The air was nippy, but after an hour of lifting squared bales of hay, Keiko was sweating. Farm work, she realized, was a lot more tiring than anyone would have thought. Fortunately, a couple other people came to help out.

" The new farmhand has some muscle. Where'd she come from?"

" The old man said she'd be sticking around, why don't you go ask her if you're so curious?"

Keiko ignored the two brothers from the neighboring farm.

Taylor, Thomas's only child, offered her some water from his water bottle. " I wouldn't mind much, they just don't have anything else to talk about," He said, as if he noticed her fight or flee reaction to the questions.

" I come from nowhere and I am going nowhere. That's as much as anyone needs to know," She told Taylor as bluntly as she could word it. " And I won't answer any questions with real answers otherwise,"

He shrugged. He reminded her of an old lover she watched die from a sniper attack. It was possibly the only reason she didn't distance herself from him. " I question not. You do the work, don't make my parents unhappy, it's all sunny in my book," He shook the water bottle.

She shook her head no. " Good. We'll get along just fine,"

He leaned in close. She had no choice but to look him in the eye. Surprisingly for his brawny frame and country charm, he seemed to unnerve her. " I don't know where you came from and I don't care to know. What I do know is that my father has helped a fair share find their way." He touched her cheek, an almost caress. " And you look like someone who needs an understanding hugâ€|not an interrogation."

Keiko laughed. Oh what little he knew.

The four of them cleared the field out by noon and started stacking the hay in the barn. " No, stack it that- Craig, step down from there, let me!" Craig's brother, Lou shouted before the pair switched positions. Keiko sat on the back of the hay wagon and watched them with a humorous smile.

" I appreciated the help," Thomas said to her before dusting off loose straw off his pants.

She shrugged. " Nowhere to go, nowhere to return toâ€|might as well put it to use if I can't get rid of itâ€|"

He didn't catch her meaning.

Keiko preferred it that way. " If they stopped fighting, they might see that the stack is already lopsided," She pointed out to him. " And the only way to fix that is to boost up where it's lopsided since you don't have the time to patch in the sagging boards."

" Are you sure you haven't farmed before?"

" Doesn't take a scientists to see that two heads still don't have enough brains for one," She said dismissively.

The insult came across without hesitation. It didn't affect Thomas any but the two brothers stopped their bickering and proceeded to ignore her presence till the end when she moved to catch him as he slipped. He shrugged her off without a word.

Taylor chuckled as he came out from the other side of the barn. " Fixed the oil leakâ€|Who set straight the monkeys?" He asked

curiously.

Keiko just scoffed. " I'll be helping Helena get dinner on the table," She walked off.

Thomas turned to his son and smiled.

" I always liked the challenges," Taylor said. " But that is one challenge I won't go near,"

" She's not a bad looker, and she can throw a bale," Thomas called after him. " And you know your mother wants grandchildren,"

Dinner was a quiet affair, as Thomas and Helena didn't ask Keiko questions, and Taylor seemed more interested in complimenting his mother on her homestead cooking. After dinner, Keiko started to help clean up.

" You don't have to help, you already earn your keep by helping with the farm land,"

Keiko took his dirty plate from in front of him. " I don't feel right not helping, and furthermore, I do have to earn my keep. What I did in the field didn't even qualify as a hard day's work," She said before stopping herself.

ONI had told her to tell any story she wanted, but she doubted telling the world about ONI's secret operation would hardly gain her any 'freedom' from them. It would probably earn her a cell in a secret prison.

" And what does qualify as a hard day's work?" He asked curiously.

This woman intrigued him. She was attractive, no doubt there, but there was more to her than just something she was hiding and how painfully obvious it was that she was hurting. He liked a challenge, but he knew trouble, and it was stamped on her forehead with a capital T.

She leaned down to meet his stare. " For me to know and you to never know, now- " She grabbed his cup, his hand still holding it. She tugged, but he kept a firm grip on it. " Taylor," She warned in a low voice.

" Answer the question,"

" Give me the cup,"

" Answer the question,"

" Give me the cup,"

Thomas interrupted as they both seemed to be tensing up. " We respect privacy around here," He said pointedly to Taylor. " As we do each other," He said pointedly to Keiko.

Taylor let go of the cup, Keiko stalked off to the kitchen to help with the dishes.

Thomas shook his finger at his son before retiring to the sitting room for the evening, a good book waiting to be read. Taylor glanced only once toward the kitchen. The woman was interesting, and there was something 'off' about her. He didn't trust it one bit.

cument here...

3. Can't Stay Here

Two weeks passed with Keiko helping out the three farmers in the small farming community. Taylor and Keiko didn't verbally spar with each other again, but there was enough tension there to cut with a chain saw. "Just how does a woman get as strong as you anyway?" Taylor demanded of her as she lifted up a log and placed it on the wood stack.

The back of the farmhouse had vines crawling up the side in a natural quilt of plant life. She shook her head. "I told you once, I told you before!"

"I know what I said but just how does a woman get strong like you?" He wiped the sweat from his brow using the back of his gloved hand. He set the chain saw down and gave the tree branch a strong kick. It snapped in half.

Keiko reached for the bottle of water. "It wasn't by luck, now let it drop," She grabbed the sledgehammer and wedge, starting on the logs.

The sound of the chain saw revving up before Taylor pressed the spinning teeth to the wood warned her that Taylor was letting it drop. "Break," He tagged her shoulder before starting for the house. Keiko followed him, her arms sore from the non-stop work. She was used for full body workouts, not single muscle groups.

Helena greeted them when they entered the kitchen and put a pile of steaming food in front of them. Keiko eyed up the pile of potatoes and vegetables mixed in before grabbing her spoon and digging in. Taylor bowed his head and said a prayer for eating his food with less wild abandonment.

"I like people with hearty appetites," Helena said before piling the plate full of food again. Keiko leaned back, running her hand over her belly. She wore one of Taylor's old flannels, which didn't reveal her incredibly fit figure honed from battle and incessant training. "Eat all you want. Our SON doesn't visit enough to help us eat the excess,"

Taylor frowned. "Mother, you know I have other jobs,"

"Such as bar tending?" Helena said sharply. "You're needed on the farm, not in a bar serving drunks."

Keiko started on the second helping.

"Someone has to bring in the money."

"You could have worked for the agricultural department or the neighbors. You're a good mechanic--"

" I told you I don't need a babysitterâ€|I can make my own decisions,"

" Obviously you can't make one involving grandchildren-"

Keiko stopped eating, looking up at them both. She pushed the plate away from her and left the kitchen. Neither noticed. Outside she sat down with Shade and sighed as she scratched it behind the ear.

" She's fineâ€|she wants that lifeâ€|" She said to the dog.

The door banged open and out stepped Taylor. Taylor swept past her and moved toward the back to resume cutting wood. She joined him moments later. " She means wellâ€|" She said while staying out of the way.

Taylor abandoned the chain saw and moved to split the logs.

" At least you have a motherâ€|"

He stopped swinging the sledgehammer, breathing heavy.

Keiko crossed her arms. " I didn't even know mine that well and when I should have been given the chance to know her, I wasn't allowed toâ€|So for all the meddling your mother does, the expectation of grandchildren â€" that just means she cares," She wished she had said something to Saeng before allowing the girl to join the Sangheili in the pursuit of a truce.

Too late now.

Taylor shook his head.

Keiko let it be. She went for a short walk to let him cool off with a little privacy. The silence, cool air, and general surroundings comforted her. When she returned Taylor was tinkering in the barn.

Finishing what he started, she knew to say anything on the subject would invite trouble. Thomas watched her tear apart an old datapad after dinner. " You were gifted, girl?"

She looked up. " My mother was a scientist."

He set his book down on his lap.

Helena joined them. " Mynn was telling me about how she scouted out the woods and found two illegal hunters."

" Not illegal, just stupid young kids," She corrected Helena with a smile. " I told them if they wanted to avoid trouble getting your permission first and not baiting the deer would be a start,"

Thomas picked up his book again. " The Hardal boys are a handful but they mean no harm," He said in good spirit.

" Hmm, I wouldn't say no harmâ€|the elder boy acts a little too much like the fire and the younger like a match," Both Thomas and Helena traded smiles. " However they'll never catch a deer stumbling around

as they do smelling like they visited a strip club." Helena frowned as Thomas laughed.

" And how would you catch a deer?" He asked.

She unstrapped the utility knife Thomas leant her. " Watch the area for days, wear wood collage colors, cover my scent with mud and leaves, set myself up—" She went on in comfortable detail. Helena became unsettled while Thomas became interested. "-and when the moment was right, execute it with a knife. Use the horns, fur, and meat. Not sure what to do with the fat thoughâ€œ perhaps a good source of flammable liquid if melted at a higher temperatureâ€œ "

" You're bleeding, dear," Helena pointed out.

Keiko looked down at her thumb. " Ohâ€œ Sticking it in her mouth, she sucked on it.

Thomas watched his wife get up and disappear. Helena came back with a soapy cloth and a bandage. Keiko didn't have a chance to stop her before the woman cleaned it off and stuck the bandage over the small cut.

" Much betterâ€œ Helena smiled and disappeared again.

" You'll get used to it," Thomas assured her. " But I discourage any hunting on your partâ€œ you'd take away the bumbling brother's fun," He disappeared into his book leaving her to her own project.

Keiko would wake to the sound of two voices in the kitchen and Thomas outside starting up his tractor. She stopped short of the kitchen, pressing her back to the wall.

"â€œ sorry I yelled at youâ€œ You just like to push the subject when you know I don't want children," Thomas said.

Something clinked, probably dishes. She could hear the bacon sizzling and smelled the eggs.

" You know it's only because I care about you," Helena said. She could imagine the woman pressing a kiss to her son's cheek and hugging his shoulders lightly at the same time. It brought a small smile to her face. " And you really should be kinder on Mynn."

" I'd be kinder if she wasn't such a stranger,"

" Well you know the strays your father brings in. Some are more broken than the others,"

She stopped smiling. She wasn't broken. She wasâ€œ lost. Or was she broken? Keiko didn't know, but she realized she couldn't stay with them forever. She had to leave before she became too attached.

Walking 'loudly, she entered the kitchen and started to make herself breakfast. Both pretended like they hadn't said a thing about her.

It was her first paycheck from Thomas and the only paycheck as far as she was concerned. She walked to town, a pack on her back with the few clothes they gave her, the utility knife, and the small pebble she took as a reminder of the place that didn't make her feel trapped. She hitch hiked part of the way to the city, walked a couple miles, and caught a bus on the outskirts.

She spent a night in an alleyway, waking at every sound. She woke to a drunk pissing against the wall at the end of the alley. Using a small store's bathroom, she cleaned up quickly before donning the blue plaid shirt and her only other clean pair of pants. She put on a practice smile. Holli stripped.

Keiko wasn't beneath stripping to make a few fast bucks to get her into a place of her own. She couldn't smooch off someone forever, and if she didn't get out there on her feet, ONI would win. ONI would never win.

The strip club was harder to find than she imagined. " I'm here to audition for the job," She told the girl at the entrance checking IDs and letting people through.

The girl eyed her up. " In that?"

Keiko started to unbutton the shirt.

" Alright, alrightâ€|Owner's in the back," She pointed to the door that clearly said DO NOT ENTER. Entering the club, Keiko listened to the song currently playing over the speakers. A stage with mirrors as the background was empty but a girl dressed in red bra and panties was about to enter stage.

Two girls worked the floor, one oriental, the other Caucasian. Both were pretty and both were healthy looking, not rail thin with bones and ribs showing.

Pounding on the door, Keiko heard someone moving around inside. A scrape on the floor. A clink of something. The handle turned. Keiko stepped back. She came face to face with a slightly overweight man with a retreating hairline. He was dressed in black slacks and a blue work shirt. He eyed her up.

" We don't hire farm girls. You'll have to take that act elsewhere,"

Keiko placed her hand on the door to stop him from closing it. " The clothes can come offâ€|I just want to audition. If I'm bad you can kick me outâ€|" She never tried stripping before but her body was fit, and she knew that Spike never had an issue with being attracted to her, or sometimes, just it.

His eyes scanned her again. He opened the door reluctantly and closed it behind her. She expected him to grab her ass. When he didn't, instead taking his seat behind the oak desk, he looked at her. " Alright, strip," He waved his hand over her.

She looked down, starting to unbutton the shirt.

" No, stopâ€|that's not how you do itâ€|Dance and strip to the music

you can hear outside," He said in frustration.

Keiko was used to being good at physical things. She listened to the sound, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. She swerved to the left, then right.

" Good, now strip," The guy said, leaning forward. " Move closer to me,"

She moved closer.

" Not smooth but we can work on that if you do well," He went on to say, putting his hands on her hips.

Keiko tensed up at first before forcing herself to relax. She began to undo the buttons one at a time, her fingers refusing to function the way she wanted them to. A black bra showed through, the various small scars lining her body. The owner didn't care as his eyes were now level with her breasts.

It was hard dancing to a near nonexistent music, letting someone else stare at and touch her. " Hmmmâ€|.now," He pulled her so that she was sitting on his lap. " Grind against me," She could feel his 'interest' and it disgusted her. She needed the money though. Until she could find a better place to go.

Money wasn't just given to her.

He grabbed her breasts and squeezed. " Hmmmâ€|you can be eye candy for a whileâ€|a lap 'interest' for the more lax customers," He granted her.

She didn't say anything.

He let her go. " Be here tomorrow evening in something better than thatâ€|" He pointed at her boots. " Heels mandatory, and not military,"

Keiko was fine with not wearing military boots. She was fine with dressing half naked. She was fine with being eye candy. But she wasn't so sure she'd be able to tell herself this was necessary when she reflected back on it in the far future.

When she came back the following evening, she looked like she was ready for men to drool over. Her once beautiful black hair was cut short so that only a slanted bang slightly covered her right eye. The hair extended the top of her neck at the base of her skull. She wore yellow lingerie that perked up her breasts and accentuated her firm ass.

Her heels were black.

She was more lean muscle than anything else, and she immediately went to the boss's office. He took one look at her before ordering her to sit at the bar and make herself look pretty.

For the next two hours, she sat at the bar, a visual tease for the men while the other girls helped relieve the lust she created in observers. At the end of the night, she went home with a small tip. Home was a small room she was sharing with three other people in

equally unpleasant situations.

The nights blended together and after the third week, the boss promoted her to lap dancer. She could 'sell' herself even more if she wished, but it was to never be in the club. She told the boss straight up if he ever suggested that to her again, she'd slap him.

He laughed at her and walked away.

She resisted the urge to go after him and put him on his ass after throttling him.

" Soâ€|you come here often?" One of her lap customer's asked her.

Keiko looked down at him. He was young, still naÃ¯ve to the world, even if his friend wasn't. " I would ask the same thing, but I don't think you'd answer honestly," He thankfully cracked a grin like she was joking.

His friend just shook his head and slipped her another bill. She went from the one to the other. " You'll have to forgive him, he's a little naÃ¯ve," His eyes were on her breasts.

She leaned over. " Aren't we all at times?"

" Hmm, yes, but he's more naÃ¯ve than most," She laughed. " What's your name?"

Keiko felt his hands on her hips, holding her close but not straying â€" as per club rules. " You can touch me, you knowâ€|"

He nodded, his hands now moving more freely. " I like a woman's permission before I take advantage of herâ€|saves the bitchslap from happening,"

She laughed at him. The song changed.

At the end of the dance, he pulled her onto his lap. " I got some timeâ€|When do you get off?"

She hesitated to answer.

" Just drinks, Maybe food," He said readily.

Keiko sighed. " Just because my stage name is Mystique doesn't mean I'm full of mysteries," She said with a slight smile. She had been asked that. It was getting annoying.

" I like me a wholesome girl," He persisted.

" No."

" Why not?"

She leaned down, her hand tracing his jaw. " Besides the fact it's against policy? I'm not interested, The answer is no,"

He frowned. " Well, you're not a very good stripper, are you?"

She laughed. " No, I'm notâ€|" Her hand closed around his thigh. " But if you can find me a job where I can use my physical skills for honest labor, I'll consider the date,"

He grinned. " That's a challengeâ€|I accept," He lifted her up with some difficulty.

Keiko knew he'd be back.

5. A Dash of Help

Keiko woke with a start, settling back down just as quickly. Someone just kicked a can in the alleyway. Her two room mates snored away. The one, a retired war veteran, had been forgotten about by society and his family. The other ticked someone off and was on the run, or that was the story the teenager told her. She didn't pry. Everyone had their horror stories and own monsters to deal with.

Sitting up straight, she pulled the small blanket over her and ran a hand through her hair. One sniff revealed that she needed to bathe before going to work. Being eye candy and giving lap dances wasn't hard, but it wasn't honorable work either. The problem was that no one was hiring, and those that were hiring, she already applied at.

She was forced to swipe a datapad from an unsuspecting business man, wiped it clean, and started using it for her own purposes. She didn't like stealing, but she didn't have the money to pay for one or the components to build her own.

In the back of her mind, she knew ONI was just laughing at her predicament. Familiar anger rose up at the injustice of the situation before she took a deep breath and threw the cover off.

" Gotta go for a walk before I lose my mind," She muttered, grabbing the thick work jacket from her back pack. Slinging the lighter pack over her back, she set off down the alleyway and started for the park. It was one of the few places she could think, even if it was surrounded by city.

People moved out of her way.

Keiko didn't know if it was because people knew she was homeless, in an almost literal sense, or if she was a stripper and loathed the job.

Two days before in the early morning, she ended up beating a would-be mugger. She walked off with just her money, half tempted to take his as payment for his evil would-be deed. That same would-be mugger veered out of her path, looking for another target to follow. She didn't stop him.

Maybe it was wrong for her not to turn him in, but she suspected someone would do what she refused to do â€" kill him.

Checking her datapad, she read a news report on two connected deaths. " Known associates of crime lordâ€|" She stopped half way through the article when she caught a pair of eyes drilling into her. Oh good

lord, it was one of her customers from the club.

" You look good even fully clothed,"

" Find me that job yet?" She asked in return.

He shrugged. " And if I did?"

" We'd go on that date that involved food and drink," She answered him, turning off the datapad and stuffing it in her pack.

" I'll tell you whatâ€|.you tell me your name, I tell you mine,"

She shook her head. Men.

" Candace, Avery, Mae, Damarisâ€|" He now blocked her path. " Maybe something old fashioned like Moira or-"

" It's Mynn, now stop your incessant guessing," She snapped at him, his lips pressed into a thin line.

He slung his arm around her shoulder. " Mynn, how very tame a name, my lovely- " He caressed her cheek. "-dame." It took all of Keiko's will not to throw him into the wall for touching her â€" intimately at that.

She shrugged off his arm. " The job offer?" She asked most reluctantly.

" Oh, factory work on North Sideâ€|Halcifer Corp." He told her.

She frowned. " I said hard labor, not pansy work."

" And a pretty lady like you could kill someone?" He started to laugh. She shrugged him off. How dare he assume she wasn't capable of taking care of herself. " Or pull anyone from a burning building? I can barely picture-"

Keiko stopped walking, the park in sight. She didn't want to carry the ill will with her there. It was the one place good thoughts reigned and all the negativity ceased to exist. " Look, if I even get the job, I'll consider it. Until then, leave me alone unless I'm working,"

He watched her walk toward the park. " I could watch you walk away all day long!" He shouted after her crudely.

Clenching and unclenching her fists, she decided between Spike choosing the ONI bitch over her and men like him were the reason she didn't bother with the opposite sex. A part of her cried for the loss of Hercules all over again. He was one of the few good things to happen to her, and she lost him prematurely.

Banishing the memory back to the dark abyss of dismissal, Keiko dropped down onto a bench and glanced around at the trees and brush. Branches draped over the walkways, all cobblestone, and the orange, yellow, and red leaves fell off at their leisure. Closing her eyes, she inhaled the scent of fall and relaxed.

Further on down an older couple strolled, arm in arm. She watched

them enviously before pulling out her datapad. Accessing the personal treasure trove of information she gathered on the companies she applied at, she saw no public connection between Halcifer Corp and UNSC. It was either an underground connection or a nonexistent one. Either way she needed a new job before she snapped someone's neck for slapping and pinching her ass at work.

A squirrel ran up the tree behind her as a patrol officer started to walk through the park. The lamp posts turned on to light the paths. Keiko got to her feet and started back for work. She figured another week of saving up her money, she could afford some better clothes. Better clothes would help her get a better job.

Entering the Blue Diamond that night, Keiko noticed the jerk was present. She dreaded the moment he turned his eye on her and beckoned her over to him. She couldn't exactly say no. " You get stage tonight," The bar tender told her.

She paled. " Since when?"

" Since Lil quit, You're up in two songs," Paul handed her a small shot of whiskey. "For courage,"

She downed the shot. " Why did Lil quit?"

" Go herself a job as a model finally," Paul cleaned out a glass with a rag. " Go work the crowd, beautiful," He winked at her.

Keiko liked Paul. He wasn't uptight, he wasn't crude, and he treated people with good humor and some respect. She sighed, and turned to face the crowd. Two of the usual, she had no idea how they could afford the club three out of seven days a week. A fresh face that Emery was working over, and then HIM.

Pushing herself on the regulars, she earned herself a small tip before going on break. When she came back from break, he motioned her over to him. Once she was close enough his arm closed around her waist and pulled her onto his lap. " Now," He stuffed the bill in her bra.

" Now, about that lap dance,"

A scowl appeared, to which he laughed, before she rose to her feet and pulled him along. One day she'd laugh at this point and smile because she was strong enough to escape it. Until then, she'd take his advice on Halcifer Corp and check it out. The enemy did help out time to time.

Hell she'd even keep her word and go on that date, but that wouldn't guarantee he kept his hand if he dared to touch her without showing some manners first. Looking down at him as he leered at her body, Keiko smiled. Oh yes, he was going to pay for being an asshole to her.

6. Not as Flawed as You

Keiko waited for him outside the club. She had been able to buy a decent dress with her last paycheck from the club. She knew that the stretch of time between the club paycheck and the factory paycheck

would be longer than she was accustomed to, but due to her Spartan training, she had little issue eating rats as long as they were well cooked, using a public restroom for cleaning up, and working long hard hours.

Her hair was smoothed back and pinned up so that both ears would be uncovered. She had on her favorite heels. Despite the pain they caused her feet at times, she actually didn't mind them that much.

" You're here," He approached her from a distance.

She smiled. " That I amâ€œ| So you know my name. I don't know yours."

He leaned toward her. " It's Thaddeus. You look great by the way," He traced one finger along her cheek.

An involuntary shudder went down her spine. She kept calm though. " Yes, wellâ€œ|" Placing one hand on his arm, she slid it down to his hand and laced her fingers through his. " We have food and drink to see to,"

He snuck in an awkward kiss that caught her off guard. His lips smashed against hers for a brief thirty seconds before his tongue tried to play tonsel hockey with hers. She slid her hand in between them and eased him back. " Easy, easyâ€œ|we have a date, remember?"

Her heart raced. Not because she actually liked the kiss but because she wanted to get away from him. She did give her word however and the moment they enjoyed the food and drink, she was gone. Listening to the veteran go on about the old days in his glitched memory was better than this.

Sliding his arm around her waist, he started steering her toward a bar. " I figured some beer, some bar food, maybe a little game of pool should set the mood quite nicely." He said casually.

She almost laughed at him. Did he honestly believe he snagged her good attentions by his atrocious manners? She wondered how any woman could want him after the way he stalked her and then so rudely threw up his superiority of knowledge in her face. It was insulting at best, unforgiveable at worst.

Instead she played along with it. " Well, we'll see..who knows?"

He guided her toward 'Lucky's Bar' where they entered to find it packed. Apparently it was ladies night because Keiko was told she'd get drink's half off. Thaddeus threw his arm around her shoulder and started calling out greetings to his buddies and some of the regulars. Keiko started to get the impression after the second surprised person that she was being put on for show.

It grated her nerves.

Seated at the bar, he turned to the bartender after removing his arm from her shoulder. " They have the best beer in this city," He ordered himself something she couldn't even pronounce. Looking down at the bottle placed in front of her, she couldn't believe that he actually ordered for both him and her.

" I can order for myself," She said, irritation spiking her words.

He smirked. " Sure you can, Babe. Now the wings and- " He held up two fingers, as the bartender started taking down the order. "- and burgers are great. Trust me, you'll like it." He stopped leaning on her.

Keiko wondered if it was too early into the date to give him his come uppance she planned for him. She tensed up before deciding to just drink the beer and let him dig himself in a deeper hole. Staring up at the video feed, she listened to the newscaster cover a story about the Innies blowing things up again. No surprise there.

She even considered joining them before she realized that all the Innies wanted was recession from everyone else. She'd willingly give it to them as long as they stopped the senseless violence. It struck her as odd why the Spartans have never been deployed against them.

" Yeah, they're a pain," Thaddeus interrupted her musings. " Now why were you working at the club again?"

Turning her head slowly, she finally rested her gaze on him with a could-he-really-be-that-stupid look. " I needed money, and as I recall, you weren't too picky about me working there,"

He smirked. " Well if you and I are going to date, working there is off limits," She nearly choked on the beer and had to swallow what she choked up. " I'm really glad you got in at the factory. I told you it was perfect for you," He gave her that annoying self-satisfied grin.

Keiko shook her head, biting her lip.

Don't say anything, don't say anything.

Thankfully food stopped him from touching her shoulder. He immediately began to dig into the wings. The smell of the well cooked food got to her. She nibbled on one before realizing it was incredibly good and then ordered another basket.

The bartender grinned. " Everyone loves the wings,"

When the next basket was placed in front of her, she slapped away Thaddeus's hand. Licking her finger tips, she started eating the second basket more slowly than she did the first one.

" I didn't realize you were such a pig when you ate,"

Keiko stopped eating, looking at him with that death stare. " You're right. I eat like a pig. Just like I work in a strip club. Just like I'm not good enough to work on the assembly line. Just like you're so perfect," She threw down a bill and started for the door.

He was right behind her and grabbed her arm. " What the hell is your problem?"

She spun around, yanking her arm towards her but not dislodging his grip. " You are my problem. Men like you are the problem," She pried

his fingers off.

" I thought I was doing you a favor " getting you out of that place. I guess you're just like the rest,"

Keiko clenched her fist and punched him in the gut. He doubled over.

" I am not like the rest, and you will treat me with respect." She hissed in his ear as she jerked him upright again by his hair before letting go. " It's you with the issues here, not me," And for once, she felt justified in her actions.

Turning on her heel, she walked out of the bar, leaving him to clean up his own mess.

7. Finding Keiko

Keiko entered the empty apartment. It wasn't much but it was a start.

Her start.

Her new home until she figured things out.

The silence broken only by sounds from the hallway. A couple argued about children? She shook her head. The news reported missing, kidnapped, and runaway children five days out of the week and they wanted more children? It boggled her mind.

Placing the pack on the floor, she sat down and relaxed. Two rooms, half a bathroom, and a sorry excuse of a kitchen and yet it was far more hospitable than anything else had been. Almost everything. She remembered the farm.

For the next two weeks, she was barely at the apartment. Between the strip club, the factory, and finding a job more suitable for her skill set, Keiko only used the shower, the stove top, and the closet. She snagged a chair from street side, made a table and foot stool out of a crate, and snagged a few books from the food drive that kept her from starving.

Creativity and thriftiness kept her mind occupied. Discovering that she could smile almost daily made her realize that Earth wasn't hopeless after all. She laughed for the first time in a long time, and just the day before she woke up after having a pleasant dream instead of a nightmare.

" You're looking good, who's the handsome fellow?" Cyrina asked her during work after noticing her humming.

Keiko shrugged. " I just feel good." Truth be told, she felt stable.

Stability made her feel safe.

Feeling safe made her realize just how lucky she was.

" Uh huh, and who's the handsome fellow?"

" There is no handsome fellow."

" There is always a handsome fellow,"

Keiko rolled her eyes. She didn't bother explaining it. Cyrina had an easy life ¯ plush. Discovering who she was outside the Spartan life was like being reborn. " I am spending time realizing a lot of new thingslike the fact I can cook meat just fine but forbid I try making vegetablesor even that I love heels even though they make my feet hurt"

Cyrina laughed.

" Go ahead, laugh," She leaned toward the woman that refused to quit digging into her life. " But I am perfectly fine without a 'handsome fellow' and other distractions in my life." In fact she was quite content having a work-centric life. It made her feel like she had a sense of purpose.

The woman lifted a box off the line and placed it on a stack. " Sure, surejust like you have crap furniture--"

Keiko leaned toward her, the woman cringing at her intense stare. " It's MY crap furniture, even if it is crap furniture," Returning to her position, she acted as if nothing happened.

Cyrina didn't push the issue. Instead of going straight home to clean up and then go out, Keiko stayed in. A knock at her door disturbed her from her book, a crappy little romance novel. She set it down and moved to the door.

" Keiko Wong?" A delivery man on the other side of the door asked her.

She frowned. " It's Mynn now, but yes. What do you want?" She searched for an ONI badge but saw none. She then searched for anything that had UNSC on it. Nothing there either. He didn't appear to have any formal or informal kind of training. He looked just like a civilian.

He offered her a package. " Just need your signature here," He thrust a clipboard at her.

She took the pen and scribbled across the line.

" It has to be legible--"

" You want to get rid of it or not?" She demanded of him in a highly critical tone.

He swallowed hard and tucked the clipboard under his arm. " Have a nice day, Ms Wong," He tipped his hat to her and left.

She looked down at the package. " And who would be sending me shit?" She asked herself before eyeing it up. The box looked like any other box. Giving it a sniff, she frowned. No odd smells either. Nothing rattled or clinked or moved. There was no heavy weight to it. Not even the sloshing of liquid.

" OkayONI, what did you send me?"

Leaving it on the ground, she moved for her knife, always close by. Sliding it from above the door, she leaned over the package. Well she was either going to die or she was going to be unpleasantly surprised.

Cutting the top open, she expected something to go boom. Or tick. Or start ticking.

None of that happened. Opening the box further, she saw one little sheet of paper. On it was a name, time, and proposition. If she said yes, all she had to do was show up.

Her suspicion mounted. Was ONI trying to lure her in? Trap her in cryo again?

She could check it out. It was right up her alley of work, and she was familiar with a ship. It would be a dose of familiarity with a mixture of freedom.

Still uncertain about it, Keiko burned the box and sheet. She realized someone had followed her home from the strip club after an early morning shift. Since that day was a double day, with the factory shift starting less than an hour later, she didn't stop to figure out who it was. She waited till the end of the factory shift and lounged around outside.

If it was ONI, they would make themselves known in the most smug manner possible. If it was someone else, she wanted to know how they knew she'd be perfect for the position. She hadn't used her real name yet in the city, not for the apartment, not for her jobs. Fortunately no one bothered to dig deeper than her surface story.

She hated and didn't want anything to do with her family, which wasn't a lie, and she was doing everything in her power to survive.

The shadow shifted some, enough to catch her notice.

She stalked toward it, two hands roughly grabbing her and throwing her into the wall. The barrel of a gun was pressed underneath her chin. "Keiko Wong?" A gravelly voice asked.

"Like to keep your life, remove the weapon," The only reason she hadn't attacked yet was out of curiosity.

A minute passed, turned into two before it was lowered.

The man stepped into the street light. He looked to be roughly near Spike's age, well built, and had a scar running the length of his arm. It looked to be a burn scar but she couldn't tell. He wore combat boots beneath his pants. There was nothing really distinguishable about him. Perhaps that was the point.

"You know who I am, who the hell are you?" She demanded, straightening out her well worn flannel shirt.

He held out his hand. "The name is Piers."

"And you know about me how?" She asked, dismissing the hand.

He let it drop back to his side. " Let's just say we know, " So her father probably had something to do with it then. " Look, I don't need nor want my father's help," She started back toward the street.

" Whoever said this had anything to do with your father?" Piers called after her.

She stopped.

" If you are interested, I'd suggest meeting me at the merchant vessel docks at the arranged time,"

He left in the opposite end. She knew that it would eat at her if she didn't show up. Cursing him, she wanted to know how he knew about her. And what he knew. She wouldn't know unless she went.

" Damn you," She muttered in contempt. Just when she was getting settled in.

8. Old Glory

Keiko leaned against the post along with the other recruits. She had her pack on her back. It was fuller than last time but she couldn't leave it behind. Her clothes, her knife, and her hard earned money. She regretted quitting at the factory, but she could always go back if she didn't like ship work. Technically it wasn't ship work. It was bodyguard work, and she was fairly good at being physical.

Even in the sexual tease sense.

Piers disembarked from Old Glory and approached the group. He smiled when he saw her among the men. She returned the smile with a nod.

" All aboard, you'll get your orders in the barracks," The men moved forward.

The ship smelled of metal, had been thoroughly cleaned, and a small crew moved about. There was boxes stacked up and labeled. Someone was taking inventory of the stock. " Mac, I need that list updated now! We're missing at least half the current cargo listed on it and I know we dropped off at least some of the crates at last port!"

" Glad you decided to join the crew," Piers said over her shoulder.

Keiko almost punched him in the gut out of instinct. " Next time don't sneak up on me like that." She warned him, her eyes narrowed on him in irritation.

He handed her a better datapad than the one she snagged. " Your orders, shifts, and miscellaneous duties. Your comrades are in the bunks putting their gear away. I suggest you do the same." He left her standing there and went to talk to the person taking inventory.

She sighed. She had a bad feeling about this, but when did she ever have a good feeling about starting something new?

When she walked, her boots made a thump sound. That would be a problem.

The doors to the barracks open with a whoosh. That would also be a problem.

Down the hall the janitor was mopping up vomit.

Not even the crew could be quiet in their duties.

" So what makes you the ONLY woman of this group?" A lean man taller than by a foot demanded when she took the bunk above him.

Throwing her pack in the locker, she emptied out the contents and started putting them away in a very specific method. " I don't know. Ask Piers,"

He moved to face her. " This is an elite merchant ship with the best of the pick. Crew, guards, payâ€|everything. What did you do to catch their notice?" He leaned in to study her closely as if that would help intimidate her any.

She rolled her eyes. " I had a very disgraceful ending to a very troubled careerâ€|and that is all you need to know." She didn't think of herself as a disgrace, despite ONI's translation of it all. She just thought of herself as trouble.

" So you killed someone?"

" Ehâ€| "

He mimicked her mock shrug. " Eh what? Did you kill someone?"

Keiko just smiled as she pulled out her trusty utility knife and strapped it to her leg. " I have to get dressed. Then I'm going to walk the ship, and then I'm going to get to know the crew. Whether I killed someone is my issue, not yours," She moved past him and snagged the uniform off the bunk and started for the shower.

She'd kill one of the men if they were true perverts and didn't respect her privacy.

The uniform was black khakis, t-shirt, and similar boots to the ones she wore most of the time outside of the strip club and factory. Her hair was professional enough and short so it didn't get in the way. She strapped the utility knife to her ankle and the communication device clipped to the belt.

When she stepped out of the shower, the two men in the barracks still stopped to stare at her. She stared back at them and looked down. " What? Is there a stain?" The one chuckled and looked away. Then it dawned on her.

She shook her finger at him in passing. " Try it and you lose it," She pointed at his groin.

His hand flew to his groin to protect his penis.

Keiko left the barracks and started for the bridge. She wanted a

visual for the vessel and each area in case there was a boarding, attack, or unusual damage. She tried to memorize as much as she could.

Paying attention to what was 'typical' and 'atypical' was what saved her plenty of times before.

Piers was on the bridge when she finally got there a half hour later. He nodded in her direction. " Sir, this is that recruit," He stepped aside to reveal a silver haired and older man that was at least two decades older but still in excellent shape for his age.

Keiko was confused. She looked around.

" Ah yesâ€¦you have an unquestionable record," The captain addressed her.

Her eyes narrowed.

" Fear not, I am not here to cause trouble," He grinned, " Unless you are still with them,"

She shook her head.

" I am Captain Adam O'Royan. You can call me Adam," He took her hand and placed a very gentleman like kiss to it. She blushed a little before pulling her hand back.

Keiko heard Piers chuckle. She'd scare him later on just for that. " I have to go finish-"

"-walking the ship and committing it to memory," Adam said. " Remember to not get lost in the cargo. It can be a maze at times,"

She walked away, self conscious about her figure from behind. Why?

Only once she got to the cargo bay did she realize he meant the warning. The crates were stacked as close as possible to the ceiling in some stacks and as low as her waist in other areas. Some were wooden, others metal, and yet some were double crated so that the contents

In and out, to the left, to the right. She got lost in the middle and resorted to climbing over crates to the get to the other side. She found herself running into one of the fellow guards. " You know your way through there?" He asked her, not having seen her climb down from a stack.

" Nope. Take string with you," She decided to figure out the maze later on.

He groaned. " Wish me luck,"

" Wish you luck," She said whimsically before disappearing to check out the other end of the vessel. On the other side was the armory and medical lab and infirmary. She'd definitely have to figure a quicker way there. Just as long as Adam didn't try to teach it to her, she was fine.

Captain Adam O'Royan had no such plans of leaving her alone. He hadn't realized the Spartan was so attractive, nor that she had that same weathered wisdom he possessed. It was her paranoid reaction that clinched his approval, complete with the wax seal.

* I was lazy...but bear in mind I also have school work and a baby, so I'll be as loyal to my updating as possible. Thank you for bearing with me, folks. Your views are appreciated, but please give me a REVIEW if I deserve it. *

9. Get Comfortable and Open Up

Keiko moved through the crates, getting lost in them only once. She got the path down pat. It was a clever anti-theft, anti-raiding tactic to be certain, but she suspected it was just as a hamper to the crew and guards at time. Shifting her rifle in her arms, she sighed. While she didn't mind being armed again, she did mind the closed quarters.

The only difference between the ship and the club was the lack of music. Considering she was one of few women aboard, several of the men had been scoping her out as a potential lover. She made it clear that no such thing would take place. The Captain hadn't gotten the clue yet, and even when she addressed him as 'Sir', he still insisted she'd call him Adam.

Instead of being disrespectful, which was hard, she walked away â€“ the lesser of the evils.

Her partner, the same one that questioned her the first day aboard the vessel, met her halfway. She started down his assigned path and he started down hers.

The days passed slowly most of the time for her. Guard duty usually was dreadful on those days, and when the crew was sleeping, she half expected an alarm to go off. At first it was hard to sleep with the absolute quiet, but she adapted to it.

" Always in thought," Piers stopped her in the corridor.

Her eyebrow lifted. " Is there anything more interesting on this vessel beside the rifle I carry and the datapad that shows me how depraved mankind is?" She asked him skeptically.

He laughed. " Depravity extends to all races,"

" I never said it didn't," She countered quickly, rearing up for a defense.

Piers clapped her shoulder. " After you're done with your shift, you're needed on the bridge for review of duties at the next port. Also the question of whether you're leaving the crew or not will be asked. Have your answer prepared for when the question is asked so that we may prepare ahead of time,"

It never occurred to her that she would be given such a quick exit, and while the idea intrigued her, she was reluctant to consider it.

Just like she had been reluctant to leave the apartment she never did get to furnish completely.

Just like the club that she adapted to.

Just like the farm that somehow made her feel safe.

Maybe it was all the new environments and her ability to adapt to them. The lack of ONI was a great help, and she couldn't deny that she liked people. She just loathed ONI personnel and their hypocritical ways. Then again, considering she hadn't encountered too many of them, or sensed any of them keeping an eye on her in person, she wasn't sure if ONI was even watching her.

" I'll think I'll be staying," She announced decidedly. He seemed surprised. " I can kill anyone who lays their hands on me, and I don't really have a homeâ€œ|I guess I'm still finding it," She smiled, a small genuine smile.

He nodded. " As you were then, Guard," He tipped an invisible, theoretical hat towards her and continued on his way to inform the rest of the guards about entering port and giving them the option of staying or going.

Keiko stopped at the entrance to the dining area, a small cafeteria that was self sufficient and cleaned by the crew after each individual use. The resident vessel couple, the nurse and navigator, were laughing about something. Her heart ached at the sight of the smiles and then she looked away when his hand covered the woman's.

Some days she missed Spike, but then she remembered the fights they used to have and knew that it was for the best to be separated from him and on her own. If she didn't set off on her own, she'd still be trapped in that depressed mindset feeling like there was a knife in her back.

True, some days were worse than others, but overall she was getting better. She even toned down her grumpiness.

She wondered where her daughters and son were, mused if they turned out anything like her â€œ even considered trying to get in touch with them. Then she remembered ONI forbade it and would probably punish her. Being a civilian, she'd be an easier target to get rid of. It didn't help she knew what they were capable of.

Turning away from the door, she started back the other way. The Captain exited his quarters and passed her. He apologized to her in passing. She recognized the Purple Heart award and wondered how he had been hurt in battle. She'd have to ask him one day when he wasn't insisting she'd call him Adam.

" Watch out for the couple in the Cargo bayâ€œ|third stack on rightâ€œ|" Lowell warned her.

She nodded and laughed. " There's a vessel slutâ€œ|" Just like there was the vessel loyalist who put the vessel first and people second. The vessel charmer who befriended everyone. The vessel loner that no one knew much about, of which she filled quite accurately and didn't

mind the least.

Later on the bridge after a brief professional talk with the captain, she looked out at the stars and wondered why they couldn't grant miracles. " I always wondered the same thing " Adam interrupted her thoughts. " If I could hide among them."

She chuckled. It was close enough a comparison. " I triedâ€¦but nothing can save me from the memories except good solid work," Holding a weapon again by her own choice was liberating.

" I always found that realizing the consequences were always worse than the choice gave me enough wisdom to set up better decisions and consequence manipulation control."

" Such as?"

" Having the vessel ready to jump after delivering an ultimatum that may lead to violence."

" Lucky youâ€¦ "

" It's not that bad starting from scratch."

" I never said it was," She declared stiffly, hating when he brought up her record, especially without warning. " And just how do you know of my record?"

Adam smirked and for some reason she was attracted to it. Or it was the fact he didn't rest on his laurels.

" You didn't think you would get to lounge around without someone keeping an eye on you, did you?"

Was he ONI?

" Not every one agrees with the tactics utilizedâ€¦" He left her to wonder just what he knew, never giving her a complete answer.

She sighed. " If I agreed to share a cup of coffee with you, would you give me a straight answer?"

He shook his head and smiled kindly. " The only way I'll divulge my secret is if you start opening up that pretty flower of yoursâ€¦and I have all the time for that," Keiko sighed and left the bridge. She disliked men.

* I also have a story called Immortal Fury. *

10. Adam

Keiko sat on the edge of the docking area with a datapad in hand. She watched as two more of the crew returned, one drunk, the other sober.

" Welcome back." She said with a small smile. " Do be careful. The Captain is doing personal alcohol possession checks,"

She personally didn't drink alcohol. Being genetically altered somewhat, it made it harder for alcohol to do anything for her. No buzz, no sense of euphoria, near impossible without poisoning herself

to even get drunk. Therefore, she hadn't had the chance to waste money on alcohol and when she decided to live on the land again, she'd have a tidy lump sum.

Piers approached with the new guy. " Everyone back?" He asked.

" Almost. Waiting on Jerr."

" He's been detained by the authorities," He told her. " This is Branx. Can you give him the tour?" He held out his hand for the datapad.

Keiko stood and handed it over. " Yep." She eyed up Paul's replacement. " I'm Mynn. Fuck with me, I fuck you up," She said before holding out her hand.

Branx glanced at Piers. Piers didn't hear Keiko, nor see Branx glance in his direction. He frowned, then smiled, and seemed to be reading down the screen.

Branx shook her hand. " Fair enough," He nodded toward the docking door that would lead to a small decontamination room and then to the rest of the vessel. " Lead the way," He had the intelligence to admire her form from a distance and without her blatantly seeing it.

Entering the decontamination room, the door sealed behind them. A gentle hum followed.

" Welcome to Old Glory. She is one of the best equipped, fastest, and most trusted merchant vessel in protected space. When we enter unprotected space, that's what we're for. To make sure those who board don't live long." She turned to face him. " Any questions?"

He held a finger. " Just one. Why are you here?"

Her eyebrow rose. " What is mobile can't be caught as easily as what is stationary," The door on the other side opened up with a whoosh. " If you have any questions, feel free to ask." Keiko lead him first to the barracks. " Here is the sleeping area. The Captain is down the corridor. We have the main eating area on this side-

" This side?"

She nodded. " Ship is essentially split by the cargo area. That's a whole other maze. The best thing for you to do is walk it a few timesâ€‘you get lost, understandable. Want to learn it? Walk it until you know the paths." She showed him the sign on the Captains door.

" Mutiny will lead to death. Tempt it, and you will perish. Furthermore, Tempt it, and you'll have a crew full of people with no intention of returning to earth until they good and ready ready to kick your ass. Lead this ship into trouble, mislead the captain-

He leaned in toward her. " I get it,"

Keiko grinned. " The food sucks, you're not allowed alcohol aboard this vessel, and you will stick to your shifts or switched shifts. Don't do your duties, you'll be fired and kicked off at next port. We hit port about every two to four weeks. The pay is good, but you earn

itâ€|and not by sitting around and playing cards either," She stopped at the bridge entrance.

Branx leaned in toward her. " Mynn, I grew up on this vessel. I know its rules, my uncle's policies, and I have no intention of being intimidated by you. Old man Piers can shove it, and thank you but no thank you." He left her standing there before entering the bridge. She followed right behind him.

Adam looked up from the control console.

Keiko stood guard at the door just in case she was needed.

Tension thickened instantly between the two men.

Branx opened his arms and grinned. " UNCLE! So good to see you again," He hugged Adam.

Keiko arched one eyebrow in question when Adam stiffened within the man's arms. " What are you doing here?" He nodded at her. She left them alone on the bridge, waiting outside in the hall just in case.

No sounds came from the bridge before the door opened several minutes later and Branx walked out. He flashed her a cheeky smile before returning to the sleeping area and passing out on the abandoned bunk.

Adam pulled her into the bridge. " I want eyes on him at all times, especially around the women," He ordered her tersely.

" Sir-"

" Also, he'll be on early morning shifts, no questions, no switchings permitted. You can not break his hand like the last guard. No physical harm will come to him." He went on as if she hadn't tried to interrupt.

Keiko frowned. Just what did this nephew want? Or did he do something on the surface and needed relocated for a bit until things settled down. " Sir, Jerr was detained by the authority. Piers knows the details," She reached out and placed one hand on his forearm after noticing his hand shaking. " You need a drink. Let's go have a coffee. I have a few minutes before shift, and you need it."

Adam looked up at her. He looked older somehow. One hand moved to massage the gray around his temples. " That sounds perfect right now," He offered his arm to her. She slid her hand around it and walked the short distance to the cafeteria. Once inside she let go and went to grab a quick snack.

When she seated herself across from him, he offered a small smile. " It's a long story,"

" It's always a long storyâ€|" She said with a smile. " Fortunately for you, I don't ask too many questions,"

" No you can't kill him," He warned her. " But you can keep him in line,"

She grinned. " I promise to be gentle,"

He covered her hand with his and squeezed. " Thank you,"

She leaned forward. " Ehâ€¢|this place is as good a home as any until I find a better one," She whispered. " And honestly, I've dealt with worse,"

Adam smiled. " Always a pleasure, Mynn,"

She stood. " Any time,â€¢|Adam,"

* I am as always appreciative of the views. Thank you and please keep coming. I promise to try my best to keep you amused. *

11. Content

Keiko looked over each person before going through the roll call. Everyone was present except Branx. Where was the man hiding at now. " Could you go find him?" She asked someone in the back. Two people broke away before she cleared her throat. " First shiftâ€¢|"

They didn't return with Branx till she was halfway through.

At the end of the meeting, she pulled him aside. " Next time you're told to be present for a meeting, you're present for a meeting. I don't care if you're sleeping with the vessel's resident slut or stuffing your face full of food-"

" And what do you know about any of that? You're constantly on my case. Get a life,"

Keiko grabbed his arm. She could feel the urge to kick his ass but ignored the acting on it part. " I didâ€¢|and when I came about Old Glory, it was to do my job. I don't know why you're on board, I don't know why your uncle puts up with your bullshit, but he's a good man, and your disrespect to him is demeaning. Grow the hell up and act like a man," Releasing him, she walked away.

He followed her. " I don't know who the hell you think you are-"

" I am someone," She turned quickly, so quickly that he bumped into her and took a step back. The lethal stare promised pain. " That you don't want to piss off. You will respect the Captain of this vessel, blood relation or not. If I hear of your disrespect again, you dismiss your duties again, I will personally see to it all you do is mop the halls."

Branx leaned close. " You're sleeping with him, aren't you?" He accused her.

" And if I am, it's none of your concern. Piss off," She moved away quickly.

After her guard shift, she knocked on Adam's door. He opened it up with a cup of coffee in his hand. " What can I do for you, Mynn?" He asked her before covering a yawn.

" Can I come in?" She asked him.

He heard the exhaustion in her voice. " What did he do now?" He asked.

She took a seat on the stool at the end of his bed. The room was about the size of the room she shared with the other guards. The bed took up the middle of the far wall. There was a fish tank with brightly colored fish swimming through false reefs. A closet full of uniforms and general clothing was the other thing in the room.

Clasping her hands in her lap, Keiko looked at him. " He's slacking off, sleeping around, and doing everything he can do defy you and me. I'm in charge of the guards, he's defying that authority. And he's disrespecting you!"

Adam sighed. " You don't understand-"

She shook her head. " I understand perfectly. He's your nephew. You love him, want the best for him. But he is here to do a job. And do a job he will," Or she was going to put her boot in his ass.

He placed his hand on her shoulder. " He's here to avoid the law. He got caught sleeping with a politician's wife, and then the daughter of a crime boss." He explained to her.

" He still has to do a damn job, Adam. This vessel is self-sufficient. We don't tolerate slackers in any form,"

He smiled. " If there's one thing I like about you, it's your work ethic, but on this be silent." He ordered her.

Keiko frowned. " He had the audacity to ask if I was sleeping with you,"

" And if you were, what would it matter? You do your job," He reminded her gently.

" That's not the point, Adam,"

" Then what is? That you think he should be more disciplined? Everyone tried to do that. You aren't the first person, nor will you be the last person," He rubbed her shoulder. " Now breathe a bit, and remember that it isn't the end of the world,"

Keiko looked at him. Sleeping with him wouldn't be a bad idea. He was attractive, for an older gentleman. He had manners. He treated her with respect despite knowing of her record. " I just want what is best for all of us, and having a fully functional crew is that.."

" Have faith, Mynn. All will work itself out,"

To hell with it, he would either like it or hate it.

She leaned forward and kissed him. A simple kiss that shocked him into silence. " That's actually not half badâ€|" She thought out loud.

He set the coffee down on the fish tank, then held out his hand. She slid her hand into his.

Keiko lay in his bed afterwards, snuggled against his nude form. His hand was around her waist, a reminder that what they did was real. She didn't know why she did it, maybe it was just to defy Branx. She loathed him most days, and it was more than just because his work ethic.

" That's actually not half bad," He echoed her original words, making her blush. " Said the woman who wouldn't dare open up,"

" You still owe me an explanation." She reminded him, turning slightly in his arms.

He traced a small scar on her shoulder. " I have an excellent A.I. that can hack any systemâ€|.How do you think I know about my nephew's behavior?" He shared finally.

She frowned. That was it? She half expected Sarge to give him the information, as much as her father tried to interfere in her life.

" And I happen to know that any normal person doesn't have nearly as many scars as you do." He planted kisses along her cheek. " Physical, emotional, or mentalâ€|But you're getting better,"

Keiko smiled. " Baby steps," She agreed before closing her eyes. " Can I stay the night?" She asked him.

He rested his head back on the pillow and pulled the blanket over them. " You're more than welcome to spend every night in my bed if you wanted," He assured her before clapping his hand and the lights went out.

Keiko slept soundly, dreaming of nothing, and waking to the bed moving. Opening one eye, she looked up at him. " I'll see you tonight?" He asked her.

She propped herself up. " I think so,"

When Branx saw her coming out of his uncle's room, he stopped her in the corridor before she could go on her shift. " If you think sleeping with my uncle is going to get you the extra authority, you're wrong,"

Keiko patted his shoulder. " I'm sleeping with him because I want to, not because there are strings attached, no hush." She left him staring after her in suspicion.

She slept with Adam because she wanted to, and quite frankly, she felt better than she did in a long time. Age was just a number to her.

* Anyone who wants to collaborate on a Halo story is more than welcome to message me, :) I'm up for a challenge. *

12. Go Back to Sleep Keiko

The space pirates had managed to outrun Old Glory. They even managed to board Old Glory, but not without sustaining damage. Keiko had been on the bridge with Adam going over plans for the next port when the

attack started, and she was currently hidden among the cargo boxes as the invading pirates stormed into the corridors, weapons hot.

Her rifle clenched in her hands, she checked the clip twice before clicking off the safety and getting ready to take down the first pirate in a no question, shoot to kill.

The pirate's protective helm was as much a bane as it was a help. He wasn't even paying attention as he ran through the maze of walkways. He got confused at the turn around point. She snuck up behind him as he started eyeing up the crates and the possibility of shooting through them or climbing over them.

She crept across the metallic crate, her boots making a barely audible thud. Before he could react, if he even noticed, she lunged forward, wrapping one arm around his neck and squeezing his airway so he couldn't scream. With her other hand, she placed it just right and then gave it a quick snap, breaking the person's neck.

Pulling him up and onto the crate, she let the body drop between the narrow crevice between the crates. Grabbing his weapon, she broke it down and placed the pieces in strategic places.

Around the ship, the guard quickly came to life, one taking a point blank shot to the chest for walking around the corner at the wrong time. He hadn't heard his radio. Another guard got clipped in the shoulder and was down for the count, unable to get an accurate shot on the rushing pirates, his defensive position over run.

Three pirates claimed the bridge after breaking the navigator's hand to prevent him from plotting a different course and a quick jump and knocking out Adam, who had made contact with another vessel close in the area.

The vessel pinged along message of the attack, unable to render assistance.

Keiko poised over an unsuspecting guard, flattened against the top of the stack with the ceiling less than inch above her. She could crawl out backwards and drop down without a problem. She might have to squeeze a little to get back through to the walkway but that just meant she'd be safer because they'd have to work just as hard to reach her.

" I want this entire ship claimed by the time I get the nav's rerouted," One pirate's radio lit up.

She smirked.

" Over my dead body,"

Waiting till the man was right across from her, she looked through the mini sight of the weapon, finger resting on the trigger.

Breathe in, Breathe out. Repeat three times. Breath in, Breath out.

Pull trigger.

The shot echoed in the cargo bay before the guard dropped dead, a

clean hole through one ear and out the other. The misformed lump was now embedded in wood with blood and brain matter splattered against the cargo marked for next port.

She crawled back down and dropped down into the thin space between the wall and the crate. It was hard not to be claustrophobic with the crate practically kissing every inch of her body as she inched along. She paused when she heard sets of footsteps rushing into the area.

Threeâ€¢| maybe four.

" What the he- "

" Who did this? "

" We got all the guards, "

" Did we? "

The three argued back and forth in confusion.

She almost pitied them. She then remembered they were pirates, taking over Old Glory. No one messed with Old Glory. It was her home. The crew was her family. No one messed her home or family.

" They have to still be in here," The one guard dared.

Oh, she was still in there, but she knew the cargo bay like the back of her hand almost. It was her tactical weapon. Her personal playground. The barrier between her and an easy exit or a barrage of bullets. On days she wanted to avoid people, a place to hide. And the shit people said without thinking anyone was around â€" she knew half of everyone's sob story just from listening in.

Positioning herself close to the corridor that would lead the medical bay / lab, she waited till the corridor was empty before starting down it as fast as possible. Entering the medical bay, she went straight to the surveillance camera, covered it with a black cloth, and then positioned herself right behind the table, just waiting for them to enter in search of her.

It took them nearly an hour to search the cargo bay, where they found the other pirate she killed. They spanned out the entire ship. She killed the first two that entered the medical bay / lab. Hiding the bodies in the corner, she stripped them down and donned the closest fitting size. Switching out weapons with them, she stepped out into the corridor.

One stopped her just before she entered the Cargo bay. " Did you see Jones? "

She thought Jones was rather an odd name for a pirate. Shaking her head, she cleared her throat.

" Capt on the bridge wanting a report. Did you find the bitch? "

So they knew it was a female.

She smiled. " Oh I found herâ€¢| " Her fist shot out and caught him in

the gut, her hand grabbing his shoulder and yanking it toward her. "She's right here," The shot would pierce his ribs, then lungs. He would be unable to do anything but die. She didn't have a chance to hide him though.

The captain was waiting for a report.

Through the cargo, she went. It was slow going but she made it to the other side undetected before she took the corridors in short stretches at a time, appearing as normal as possible. She hadn't really been 'alone' for her missions. She was always with a partner or team.

Finally she was outside the bridge entrance. With a solid boost of hope, she entered. " Captain, here to report,"

The pirate captain turned around.

Keiko raised the rifle and pulled the trigger.

The pirate captain's face transformed into hers, and she woke with a sweat, her hand flying to where the bullet would impact. Just sweat.

Adam pulled her back down. " It's just another bad dream, and I'm still here," He whispered in her ear. " Go back to sleep, Keiko."

She turned and looked at the holographic picture of them together. It had been at least a year since she was aboard, and she'd come along way. They married at last port, and even though she occasionally got weird dreams, sometimes disruptive, he didn't leave her go. In fact he held on even tighter.

So she, Keiko, went back to sleep, a new a woman living a new life.

* This is the final chapter of the story. I feel that I have delivered Keiko to a suitable stopping point. I apologize to anyone that is disappointed with the ending, but I am a fanfiction writer for a reason = my writing isn't publishing worthy, copyright issue aside. I appreciate all feed back. * Thank you for the reviews and favoriting me. You have no idea how good it feels. *

End
file.